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Practical Literacy Matters: Teacher Confidence is Key

THERE IS LITTLE QUESTION THAT WE NEED TO CONTINUALLY ADDRESS LITERACY WITHIN CTE. RATHER, THE ISSUE FOR MANY CTE TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS BECOMES **HOW TO EFFECTIVELY IMPLEMENT LITERACY STRATEGIES IN THE CLASSROOM FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT.**

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and his research team at Cornell University are currently in their third year of research into the Authentic Literacy in CTE research project in partnership with the NRCCTE. This article arose from interviews with participating teachers during the second year of the research. Comments on this article and questions about the research may be directed to Park at tdp9@cornell.edu.

LITERACY IS CLEARLY IMPORTANT TO CAREER AND TECHNICAL education (CTE) teachers, who strive to integrate these core academic and cognitive skills and knowledge into their classrooms. There is little question that we need to continually address literacy within CTE. Rather, the issue for many CTE teachers and administrators becomes how to effectively implement literacy strategies in the classroom for maximum impact.

Based on CTE teachers involved in a literacy study conducted by a research team at Cornell University through the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education (NRCCTE)¹, evidence shows that teacher confidence is low regarding the integration of reading and reading strategies within CTE. CTE teachers are “not English teachers”² and generally seem unsure regarding strategy use, reminding us that, “I’m not a reading teacher. I’m not a writing teacher.” Strategies and literacy frameworks are viewed as arising from the core academic areas rather than owned by the CTE community, leading to teacher reluctance (*i.e.*, Barry, 2002; Bean, 1997; O’Brien, Stewart, and Moje, 1995). Bolstering teachers’ confidence with the use of literacy strategies in a CTE classroom is essential to effective integration.

Numerous teachers noted the use of strategies “could have been more successful had I delivered them better.” Students will be more likely to show willingness to try strategies or to improve their vocabulary and comprehension skills when their teacher confidently models and uses content area reading strategies to aid in

learning from text in CTE courses. One teacher noted, “If the teacher’s pumped up, ready for battle, then the kids will go along and they were good sports. They tried. They tried everything even though some of it didn’t work.”

Teacher Confidence is Key

Teacher confidence and resistance are linked. When a teacher confidently understands the literacy framework for reading strategies, that teacher will find success in implementing strategies even though he or she may not have taught with literacy strategies. While a teacher may not feel completely comfortable with a strategy, especially in the initial stages of adoption, if he or her appears to be, the effective use of the strategy will increase greatly.

Teachers in our research noted that students who were usually intimidated by reading noticed the teacher’s confidence and took the first tentative steps toward reading and comprehending. If students infer teacher resistance in using a strategy, then likely students who are struggling readers will dismiss the strategy immediately and play on the teacher’s insecurity. It often leads to resistance on both sides. Also, teachers perceived that students’ resistance in using strategies impacted their perseverance with the reading strategies. One teacher noted, “Even the kid that sleeps all the time was in the game plan; it was incredible,” and the strategies worked so well that, not only did the teacher continue to use them, but also “kept trying to get my principal to come and witness it, to see how well it worked.”

Teacher understanding of reading

ONE OF THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAYS THAT TEACHERS CAN HELP THEIR STUDENTS SUCCEED (AND THEREFORE GROW CONFIDENCE) IS TO BE STUDENTS THEMSELVES.

strategies is one key to building confidence. Effective professional development can improve understanding of literacy strategies if teachers have opportunities to (a) use the strategies as students would, (b) understand how the strategy attempts to aid students' comprehension, and (c) integrate literacy frameworks and strategies into their lessons.

The Use of Literacy Frameworks

It is crucial to choose literacy programs with strong frameworks and multiple literacy strategies, which can then be tailored by each teacher or CTE field to address the diverse needs of the CTE

classroom. There are many aspects of effective literacy programs which must be addressed. First, teachers need clear professional development that includes the opportunities to experience the strategies from a student's perspective, to see examples that are relevant to their unique classrooms, and to work with experts while integrating the framework into their lesson plans.

Once teachers implement the framework, they need access to a community of practice that includes peer teachers and mentor teachers who have experienced the frustrations and excitement of literacy integrations. These teachers provide sug-

gestions for improvement of literacy integration, with some expressing sentiments such as, "God, I wish we had started this much earlier in the year," after discussing the program with more experienced teachers. Teachers in the NRCCTE/ Cornell research suggested coaching in classrooms with real-time feedback and constructive criticism. Finally, teachers can gain confidence through student receptiveness and improvement, so the literacy program needs to take student comfort into account.

When looking into literacy frameworks, teachers and administrators must effectively research the programs. Asking a literacy expert is one of the most valuable steps in identifying effective literacy frameworks. When actually implementing a literacy framework, space must be provided to encourage discussion among teachers regarding the framework and individual reading strategies. That space may be professional development time, an electronic e-mail list, Web page, or bulletin board in the break room. Many teachers noted that "creating some sort of folder where you can go for lesson plan ideas and then you just kind of download them and you tweak them to fit your needs" helps in implementing the literacy framework.

As a means of generating greater numbers of teachers within the same CTE fields, administrators may consider partnering with other schools that are also using the framework. Teachers in our research indicated interest in classroom observations from experts (either successful teachers or literacy coaches) to help with the initial trials with strategy implementation.

Ways to Ensure Student Success

One of the most effective ways that teachers can help their students succeed (and therefore grow confidence) is to be students themselves. Our teachers who asked questions during the professional develop-

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ment tended to be the ones who utilized the literacy frameworks with more frequency. Second, teachers need to be open and try to implement strategies three to four times in order to contextualize the reading strategies within their CTE content and within their teaching practice. In the NRCCTE/Cornell research, teachers consistently mentioned the third trial at implementing any particular reading strategy was when they found success. The third trial of a strategy became easier and more effective, because teachers knew what to expect, both from the strategy and from students. Third, teachers need to know the reasoning behind how the strategy works, rather than implementing the strategies blindly.

For example, some strategies improve vocabulary and are often used at the beginning of a lesson, while others focus on summarizing information and are used at the end of a lesson. When the framework behind the strategies is known, the quirks of some strategies, which may be dismissed as confusing, become clear and necessary. Finally, teachers can help one another in a community of practice. Teachers may become discouraged because the strategy is not working "right" in their classrooms; likely other teachers have had success and can offer help.

Teacher confidence is crucial to a literacy program's success. It is a crucial tool in the toolbox of helping students learn and become professionals in any CTE field. When teachers have the confidence to confront a new strategy by themselves, everyone wins. Students gain valuable tools that will help them develop skills for lifelong learning. Teachers feel the satisfaction of successful learning. Administrators experience enthusiasm toward program implementation. When students feel confident regarding literacy, not only can they learn more effectively in their discipline, but they can use those skills to expand their knowledge to tangent subjects and boost success in their careers. ■

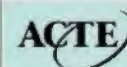
Footnotes

- 1 For more information, see Park, T.D., Santamaria, L.A., van der Mandele, E., Keene, B.L. and Taylor, M.K.. (2010). *Authentic Literacy in Career and Technical Education: Technical Report, Pilot Study from the NRCCTE*.
- 2 All quotations come from end-of-study interviews with teachers during the 2009 pilot study of *Authentic Literacy in CTE*.

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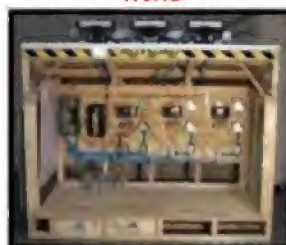
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